Oona's blood is a river delta blending east and west, her hair red as Tennessee clay, her heart tangled as the wild lands she maps. By tracing rivers in ink on paper, Oona pins the land down to one reality and betrays her people. Can she escape the bonds of gold and blood and bone that tie her to the Imperial American River Company?

I was born in 1892 on the banks of the Mississippi, in that muddied, mongrel part of the world where the East and West are separated only by the coalsmoke-scummed river.[1]

My mother was a Westerner, an Amerind woman who made her living on the liminal economy of the river, unloading ships at dock and manning short-handed steamers. My father was an Easterner—one of those scruffy, perennially drunk men who float down the river like driftwood. They must have passed a few pleasant August evenings together, because my mother gave me an Irish name in his honor: Oona. I have his hair, too, a dirty red color like Tennessee clay. That's all I know about him.

Growing up, people hissed that I was born to be a mapmaker, being half of one thing and half the other. In our language, the word for *mapmaker* is also the word for *traitor*.

They never said that about my younger brother Ira, product of my mother's brief affair with some poor Christly white man who crossed the river to bring his tortured god to the red man.[2] But no one could have said anything sour about Ira, with that wistful little smile and that slight, red-tinged translucency along his cheekbones.

If my aunts could have thrown me out and kept Ira after my mother died, they would have. They spent their time tending their spite like a well-made fire, my three aunts, hating every trace of the East that leaked across the river. Including me.

But I suppose in the end they were right about me. I signed my contract with the Imperial American River Company in 1909. I took a cramped room on the Eastern bank above the Gateway Barroom, close enough to the river that the tang of oil and engine smoke drifted through my window as I slept.

I was a mapmaker for ten years.

I wrote pages and pages here about the intricate trials of a mapmaker's labor—the lonely half-lives we lead among the Easterners, the way our own languages grow heavy and strange in our mouths, and especially the terrible stillness we bring to the land, like a kind of dying. But I tore those pages out and sent their ragged-edged bodies floating down some nameless creek.

It's only the end that matters: September 9, 1919, when I crossed the river with Mr. John Clayton and his surveyors as I had done six days a week, come rain, shine, or the end-times, for nearly a decade.

The morning was hot and greasy, like butter left out of the icebox too long. Clayton's men hunched together on the flatboat, wearing expressions that said today was likely to be the day the West swallowed them up whole and spat their bones downstream, regardless of their prior experiences.

I have always blamed Marcus Polo and his fancifully deranged *The Book of the Marvels of the West* for encouraging such fears among Easterners.[3] Whether or not Polo was truly the first Easterner to make it past Virginia, and whether he was given buffalo milk in the court of the King of the Great Plains, I don't know, but I can say with certainty there are no dragons or winged deer or cannibals in the West. At least, not on the half-tamed borders where I grew up.

There's just the land. The fey, shifting land that twists beneath your feet and runs in mad paths of its own devising, which might lead you away and never let you out again.

I was the expedition's mapmaker, the men's safety and sanity, but none of them could bring themselves to trust a half-savage.

Except Clayton. Although perhaps *trust* is the wrong word—when a person ties a noose around your heart and holds the end of the rope in their palm, do they really need to trust you?

Clayton stood braced in the center of the flatboat, eyes fixed on the horizon as though his gaze alone might force the land flat. He turned and smiled his gold-glinting grin at me, indulgent and proud, the way owners smile at their favorite hounds.

I hated him. I have always hated him, and I suppose I will go on hating him until I die, and when my bones are swinging from some great Western pine they will rattle in the wind and whisper their hollow hatred to one another until there is nothing left of him and nothing left of me.

But I kept my hate hot and acid in my belly, because there was nowhere else for it to go.

The Western shore was damp and gravelly that morning, where the day before it had been gray mud and reeds. I couldn't prevent these tiny rebellions, these ripples in the land, and I didn't care to; it's good for Easterners to see there's still something left alive in the West, no matter how solid the earth feels beneath their boots or how carefully they draw their maps.

Clayton charted us a path north and west that morning, into new territory. It was the first time in several years that our crew had gone out of sight of the shoreline—where the comforting, unchanging outline of Stone Gap waited for us on the Eastern side—and there was mutinous muttering among the ranks.

"The Company feels the shore is sufficiently stable for their needs. It's land we want now, boys, space to stretch our wings. Ms. Oona here will lead us true." Clayton's hand landed on my shoulder. I didn't flinch.

I closed my eyes and felt the shape of the land around me. I led them true.

They *need* mapmakers, you see—a few traitors like myself to hold the land still. They need us more than anything in the

world, if they ever want to fulfill that destiny so manifestly their own, “to overspread the continent allotted by Providence.”[4]

Without us, the land won’t lie still. It writhes and twists beneath their compasses, so that a crew of surveyors might make the most meticulous measurements imaginable, plotting out each hill and bluff and bend in the river, and when they return the next day everything is a mirror image of itself. Or the river splits in two and one branch wanders off into hills that shimmer slightly in the dawn, or the bluffs are now far too high to climb and must be gone around. Or the crew simply disappears and returns weeks later looking hungry and haunted.

The land has bucked them like a half-tamed horse for more than two centuries.[5] But above any other vice or virtue, the Easterners embrace persistence. And slowly, acre by hard-fought acre, they are succeeding.

By the 1830s they’d settled as far as Virginia, and Captains Lewis and Clark had discovered the great utility of employing native guides.[6] By 1890 they had reached the edges of the Mississippi. The river put up a respectable resistance, but soon the steamships puttered up and down it without fear of finding themselves suddenly on some strange waterway with black water and blue-gold hills on either side. Now new companies form every day, each of them clawing westward with hungry hands. Each of them relying on the moment when someone like me might close her eyes and hold an image of the land still in her mind, feeling its endless permutations but soothing it like a fractious horse, settling on only one place.

I walked north down a path the others could barely see. It wound first beneath pines so dense they made a queer, needled twilight, then opened onto a shaded glade filled with red columbines blooming carelessly out of season.

I knew those columbines. I stopped dead, stunned by the sudden weight of old hurt. “Mr. Clayton.” He appeared at my shoulder, oozing the moneyed smells of tobacco and pomade. “Are you certain this is the direction the Company requires?”

“Is there some kind of problem?” His voice had that dangerous drawl to it, the deceptive laze of a predator.

“No,” I lied. “It’s just this is going to be a real difficult path. I can tell.”

There was a brief, sharp-edged moment of silence. Then he said, “Oona, sweet, I’m not interested in that. Not a bit. Don’t make it harder on yourself than you’ve got to.”

I closed my eyes again, feeling the land sliding again into the place I wanted to go least in the world. There is no reasoning with it, no forcing it. Mapmakers don’t *make* the land; we only hold fast to whichever shape it gives us. I walked forward.

The trees grew taller, darker, more twisted. The men’s voices descended to whispers.

The path ended in the center of the wood. Bones hung from the black branches like skeletal chimes, clacking their welcome to me. I wanted to run, or to weep.

Easterners might call that place a “graveyard,” but the name would be a typical Eastern fallacy, associating specific places with specific purposes as though they might remain permanently fixed. We call it by a dozen different names.[7] My aunts call it *the bone trees* or, in their more dramatic moments, *the trees that take up the dead to sing for seven generations*.

It’s the place that comes for the dying, the mourning, and the dead. It’s the place waiting outside the cabin door when your mother is rasping those terrible last breaths beneath her pile of quilts. When she falls quiet, and you and your brother wrap her tight and haul her gently outside, it’s the place looming dark and knotted around you, limned in red columbines.

Funerals in the West are fleeting things, like black hounds padding past you in the night. Ira and I laid our mother down beneath a gnarl-boughed old queen of a tree, kissed her red cheeks, and turned away.

That day with Mr. Clayton was the first time in almost ten years I'd seen my mother's bones, fresh and white as laundered linen, hanging from the tree in a pattern like a smile.

"*Jesus*, Oona, what is this?" Clayton flung his arm toward the skeletons hanging around us like macabre Christmas decorations.

"It's a kind of—graveyard," I offered. A strange feeling, a shaking and burning, seemed to be crawling down my spine.

Clayton spat. "Well. They don't seem to be very *buried,* do they?"

I did not attempt to explain that no sane Amerind would have their body locked in an oaken casket to rot. When we die each of us is granted this one strange and hurting miracle, to be lifted up into the bone trees by the unseen hands of the land.

At least, I hoped that was the miracle waiting for me. Some of the nastier children used to tell me stories about half-bloods left lying on the ground to decay, unrecognized by the bone trees. My aunts never said one way or the other when I asked.

"Damned uncanny savages." Clayton gave a brazen laugh, to communicate precisely how little he cared about such primitive rituals. "To work."

The surveyors began unpacking their instruments in the muted rhythms we all knew well. Tripods were erected, camp tables were balanced on the uneven ground, and pale green undergrowth was hacked out of the way. Our artist set up his easel and began to paint the scene in deep indigo and gray-white. The Company had found it profitable to employ artists to record the landscape in a particular size and shape; it seemed to help hold the land more true to itself.[8]

My work required no tools or instruments. I merely stood in the center and settled the ripples as they rose out of the earth. But I was still shaky, distracted. I found myself looking up at the bones, around at the men tromping carelessly between the trees, at Clayton standing beneath my mother's rattling ribs, fingering his silver pistol.

There was a sudden swooping feeling, as if we'd all missed the last step on the stairs. Men swore. The shadows of the trees seemed to slide eerily over the ground. The bone trees were still around us, but now there were eight paths leading away, and the mid-morning sun seemed to be slanting the wrong way through the trees.

Clayton cursed. "*Hold* it, woman," he hissed.

I tried. I want you to know I tried, that it was no noble act of rebellion but just sentimental failure. I knelt down and closed my eyes and bent my will earthward, grasping for that certainty, the sureness that was required.

Easterners often suppose the process of mapmaking involves some arcane Amerind magic. They like to talk about the connection between Nature and Her Native Sons, and the ancestral, spiritual connection to the land that supposedly runs in our blood.

But if mapmaking is magic, it's only the magic of *knowing*—knowing the land and its hundred faces so well you carry the shape of them in your marrow. It's the kind of heart-deep familiarity that lets you recognize your brother from the tiniest half-glimpse of the top of his head in a crowd of people. If an Easterner were born and raised in the West, spent their childhood running through secret, strange woods and meadows that were sometimes mountains, drunk on the shifting shapes of the horizon, I imagine they could be mapmakers, too.

I tried, but I felt myself failing. The shadows continued their creeping dances through the roots. The trees seemed to twist darkly down around our heads like a thorned crown. The hollow hooting of some unrecognizable bird echoed around us. The men had abandoned their instruments and backed toward the center.

Clayton said my name. He was still standing tall and straight beneath the bones, unafraid. I hated him for that, too, because he should have been afraid, trapped in an Amerind graveyard with his mapmaker failing him.

“If some . . . superstition is going to compromise your work, Oona, then I suggest you take us back home.” Casually, as if he were clearing cobwebs from the ceiling, he yanked my mother’s femur down from the dry vines that held it.

He stepped forward, touched the grained knob of the bone to my cheek. “Take us home, Oona.”

I teetered on the edge of some great red chasm, looking down into its molten center and longing for the sweet heat of it. I wanted to let go entirely of this acre and let the land swallow them all up, lose them in labyrinthine caverns forever, leave them stranded along craggy cliffs with no one but the vultures. To hell with the Company, with my contract.

If it had not been for Ira, I suppose I would have done it. Clayton knew it. The gold in his smile winked down at me like a malevolent star.

I led them out of the woods that day and back to the edge of the Mississippi, where the boat bobbed patiently in the current. No one spoke during the crossing except to whisper a few impotent prayers.

Clayton told us all to take a rest day tomorrow, after a fright like that, and to return the following Wednesday. His voice was still that drawling, unhurried purr, but his eyes made me think of the gray hunks of ice that flowed downriver in the deepest weeks of winter.

I fled to the Gateway Barroom with sweat sliding like hands down my back.

By six o’clock I was slumped against the back wall of the bar, suspended in a golden haze of whiskey and tobacco smoke like an insect preserved eternally in a lump of amber. I had failed to maintain the delicate balance between no-longer-tormented and able-to-walk-upstairs, and only the arms of my chair impeded my inevitable tilt toward the floor.

Most mapmakers drink, I'm told. The Easterners are scientifically certain it's our primitive urges reasserting themselves, and they form charity groups to Save the Red Man from His Natural Enemy, but really it's because of the work. Mapmaking is like tackling your dearest childhood friend and pinning her to the ground while men in linen suits draw red-and-black lines across her flesh. It is the basest treachery.

But it pays. I was so tired of grubbing on the frayed edges of my little village in the West, begging from my aunts' lean larders and feeding Ira catfish that tasted of trash and oil. I thought the money—real Eastern dollars with presidential portraits in smeary green ink—would soothe the sting. It did. At first.[9]

After six years I was cold and heartsick. I tried to break my contract. I didn't understand, I suppose, the depth of the Easterners' obsession with their Westward march, the way it had come to infect every soul, their belief that "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of Eastern settlement" are what defines "the exceptional Eastern character."[10]

I didn't understand that the Imperial American River Company would never, ever let me go.

I showed up to the pier one morning weaving and disheveled, smelling like I'd spent the previous evening fermenting slowly in a whiskey barrel. I told Clayton I wasn't going to be a mapmaker anymore, that I regretfully had to break my contract. Everyone had a moment to appreciate my composure and bravery before I vomited several gallons into the river.

Clayton didn't seem especially concerned by either event. He smiled crookedly at me and said, "Oh, Oona." Then he ordered the crew to unload and head back to town. I was left covered in acrid sick, my head connected only distantly and unpleasantly to my shoulders, with something riotous happening in my chest.

I looked across the river at the slow spirals of greasy smoke, at the clouds running in their dawn circus of rose and gold, and thought for a time that I was free.

I went home to Ira and my aunts as soon as I was sober enough to hitch a ride on a flatboat. Ira's face seemed too fragile to hold a twelve-year-old's unfettered glee, as if his huge smile might crack him in half. My aunts were less enthused, sitting hunchbacked around their fire with lines running down their faces like tears. I wondering uncharitably if they were more bitter about my Eastern impurities or the absence of the sizable payment I sent them each month.

For eight days—days that still shimmer in my memory, like precious metals winking out of a rock seam—I thought I could live with Ira in our little cabin forever. But on the ninth day a crew of khaki-clad state workers rapped on my door.

Two of them sat me down to ask a series of dull, persistent questions.

"How would you describe your financial situation now that you lack employment?"

"Utterly dire."

"Do you find you can provide for Ira's basic needs?"

"Yes."

"What has the doctor recommended regarding his condition?"

I stopped answering, watching another worker pushing and prodding at Ira's thin chest, listening to the rasp of his lungs, laying white fingers across his forehead. I remember a sound in my skull like a thunderstorm rolling nearer.

"Excuse me, but what the *hell* is this?"

"Ms. Sawgrass, there's no need for that kind of language."

"The hell there isn't! Get your goddamn hands off him—"

I lunged toward Ira, but never made it to him. A tall Easterner with a face like curdled cheese sank his fist into my stomach and left me retching on the floor.

They explained to me that I was an unqualified guardian, that Ira suffered from every sign of neglect, and that his consumption earned him a place at St. Joseph's Sanatorium in Mayfield. I half-crawled toward him again. A boot heel connected with my face and all I could hear for a while was the cartilaginous echo of my nose breaking.

I lay heaving and sobbing, snot and blood drawing watery red patterns in the dust, while they took him away. Ira's slight shoulders shook beneath dirty cotton as they hauled him into the boat.

My aunts hobbled over to me and spat, one after the other, on my curled-up body. They were cleverer and older than I was, and already knew the reason the authorities of the Eastern States had suddenly descended on our quiet border village and abducted my brother.[11]

Because I was a mapmaker, and I had broken my contract.

When I returned to work the following morning Clayton was waiting for me with the confidence of a man who has placed a bet on a rigged horse race. I didn't say anything to him until we were unloading at the pier at dusk.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"Where is who, my lovely Oona?" I stared at him with eyes hollowed out by hate and regret. "Ah, the young Master Ira, wasting away from consumption. He's receiving the very best care at St. Joseph's. If you behave, I'll see if I can arrange some visiting hours for you." He stepped closer to me as the last of his surveyors trudged homeward. He touched my cheek with one calloused thumb. "If you behave very, very well, I'll make sure they give him the good stuff—they've got some new drugs, powerful things, that might give him years."

I would've paid any price to take back the tear that made its salt-slicked path down to his thumb. "One day, Clayton, I swear by all the bones of the West, I'll kill you." It came out flat, toneless, without an ounce of belief.[12]

He laughed, kissed my cheek, and left.

I was a model mapmaker for four more years. I led them wherever they liked, I held the land still as a corpse, and on Sundays I took the train to Mayfield and visited Ira at St. Joseph's.

I drank. And when that wasn't enough, when the crust of the earth beneath my feet felt so thin and friable I thought it might crack open like a vast eggshell, I took some local man up to my room and forgot everything in the urgent percussion of our limbs.

That night after I failed to hold the bone trees, I was half-waiting for my late-summer lover to walk through the doors. Francis was a pale clerk who worked upriver keeping books for the ferries. He was kind to me, I suppose, but he didn't love me so much as he loved the thrill of fear when my teeth closed on his pale shoulder, as though he always half-suspected I would run wild one night and tear him into long white strips of flesh.

I hoped he would come that night just to help me upstairs without making a fool of myself. He didn't. I made a fool of myself.

When the barman dumped me into bed I fell into a hazed stupor somewhere between sleeping and dreaming and dying. My favorite kinds of dreams—of the wilder far West, where red buffalo still ran in their endless, rolling oceans of sweating hide, where the mountains hid a thousand secret and twisting valleys—slipped away. They were replaced with something gray and looming. I felt Clayton's ghostly lips touching my cheek again and again, felt the finality of ownership in that touch.

I must have slept eventually, because I woke in the humid midmorning feeling like some poor forest creature fallen into an alcoholic swamp, exhausted by my own thrashing and soon to decay. The taste in my mouth indicated the rotting might already have begun.

But Ira wouldn't care. He'd seen me worse.

Mayfield was only twenty or so miles East, but it was like crossing into a different country. The land sliding past the train windows was old and well-settled, utterly quiescent beneath the plows and plantation crops, as though it was distantly embarrassed by the mischievous shapeshifting of its youth. I'd heard people say Western Kentucky was a model for the march of civilization the world over, a near-miraculous transformation from dark and bloody ground to profit.[13] I always wonder what happened to the other faces of the land—did they die? Fade to silver like old-fashioned daguerreotypes? Perhaps they only lay gently down to sleep.

I walked from the station along a narrow lane bordered by stubbled cornfields. St. Joseph's loomed eventually on the horizon. It was an ugly, gray stone square with narrow slits for windows, as if it were some Old World castle which might need to defend itself with arrows and boiling oil at any moment.

The familiar guilt settled over me as I looked at that gray beast and thought of sweet Ira trapped in its belly. He always assured me, in his earnest adolescent way, that I needn't worry about him or imagine he was suffering. Then he would pat my hand and ask to play another round of Sticks and Bones.[14]

I would be lying if I told you I was without hope. The fat yellow tablets he took every morning and evening seemed to be working their miracle cure on him those first few years. The rattle in his chest seemed to lessen; his fingernails lost their blue-bruised look. If he seemed thinner and paler in the last few months, well, perhaps it would get worse before it got better.

I knew the shackles Clayton hung on my wrists were made of both fear and hope, and I knew hope was by far the heavier of the two. But knowing didn't matter much, in the end.

The nurses in the front offices waved me past with terse little motions. I knew the way, through two floors of wood-paneled halls that smelled of chlorine and consumption, blood-tinged and rotting.

But when I opened his door, mustering my most cheery smile, I

found Ira was not alone. He was propped on half a dozen pillows, his light eyes ranging between three men standing at the end of his bed.

Clayton. And a thuggish employee of the Imperial American River Company, familiar to me by the menacing shape of his gloved hands.

“Ah, Ms. Oona, here at last. A late night, I suppose.”

I couldn’t speak. My mouth was full up with something mad and inarticulate, like howling.

“Take a seat.” Clayton’s voice had lost the softening edges of his drawl. Now it had a flat, driving quality that made me think of railroad spikes and hammers. I didn’t move. His man closed a fist around my red braid and tugged me into a chair, as if he were leading a recalcitrant horse by its reins.

“Oona—” Ira’s eyes were two moons shining at me, huge and fearful.

“It’s fine, hon,” I told him untruthfully. “These men are just here to talk to *me* about my *work*. It has nothing to do with you.” The threat in my voice sounded terribly, awfully like a bluff.

Clayton gave a genial headshake. “Well, it didn’t have to involve you, Ira my boy, but your sister has made some regrettable errors of late. Awful disappointing from my perspective, from the Company’s perspective.”

Clayton dragged a stool across the floor and sat at Ira’s side. He leaned in like a conspirator. “See, your sister made a promise to us. She swore she’d help us spread the light of progress to the West in exchange for fair pay, but she keeps trying to weasel out of it. Now what does that make her?”

Ira did not answer, but stared at Clayton with a curiously impassive expression, as though he were a botanist examining a fascinating but toxic new species. My brave, foolish brother.

“It makes her a traitor. And we can’t have that.”

“Clayton—please, it was an accident, a stupid accident, we can go back tomorrow and fix it, I swear I can hold it—” But my words withered away. There was pity lurking in his long-lashed eyes. You don’t pity the unhurt, the unbroken.

I think I screamed. I know the big man tightened his grip on my hair and crushed one hard palm against my mouth and already-crooked nose. Clayton leaned over Ira’s bed and picked up his wrist gently, almost lovingly.

I flailed, succeeding only in kicking the chair out from under myself and dangling stupidly from my own braid, biting at that impassive palm.

It happened so quickly and efficiently that I would have missed it if it weren’t for that sound: a dull cracking like dry branches beneath boots, like a china plate falling to the floor, or like three fragile finger bones snapping.

Even then, even while Clayton wrenched each finger with precise brutality, Ira barely made a sound above a choked sigh. He seemed somehow distant from the four of us writhing, struggling humans in his room.

It ended. Clayton straightened up, ruffled Ira’s hair in casual apology, and strode out. His man followed. I clattered to the floor like a masterless puppet.

I must have been making a great deal of noise, something like a scream or a wail, because nurses streamed into the room in a white-pressed line, little crimps of vexation between their brows. I was pulled aside, stuttering with tears and curses, wanting to knock each of their creased white hats onto the floor and stomp them.

The nurses stretched Ira’s fingers straight and wrapped them in gauze. They chastised him for being so clumsy as to fall out of bed and left without meeting our eyes. We were left alone again with the late-afternoon sunlight spilling in honey-and-blood pools across Ira’s bed.

I slunk to Ira's side like a beaten dog, buried my bruised face in his chest—hot, frail as the netted twigs of a bird's nest—and felt him stroke my hair with his unbroken hand.

We lay in silence for a long while. I was all hollow inside, like a lightning-struck tree gone dead and punky at my center. Ira was still except for the familiar heaving motion of a person clamping their jaws around the coughing.

"Oona," he asked in a burred voice, "what would you do if you weren't a mapmaker?"

"I'll always be a mapmaker." It was true; Clayton had added a dozen years to my contract when I tried to quit, and he could go on adding years until the day I died so long as he had Ira locked up at St. Joseph's.

"But what if it were. If you were free."

I hated playing these sorts of what-if games—we two prisoners surely did not need them. But I told him the truth. "I'd go West."

"Home?"

"Hell no. I'd go farther West. So far West they wouldn't know why I had red hair, wouldn't know about borders and maps and traitors." Too far down the what-if path; I found I couldn't stop myself. "I'd go adventuring, I'd ride down unknown rivers like Conrad and Darwin did, but I wouldn't write down a word of what I saw so no one could ever follow me."[15]

Ira looked so beatific, so pleased with my answer that I asked: "And what would you do? If you weren't sick." And locked up in this hellish place, held hostage, broken for his sister's failures.

My question surprised him into a cough. It was the worst kind of coughing, seeming larger than the body that contained it, bending him in half and spraying dark blood across his sheets. My faith in the yellow tablets wavered.

I held his shoulders until it passed, gave him water, patted the blood dry. As I had done for our mother at the end.

He lay back and smiled up at me with rust-stained teeth. “Why, I would go with you, of course,” he said.

I wanted to cry. I wanted to break every single window in St. Joseph’s and dance barefoot through the glass. I wanted to run away.

Ira knew it. “You’ve got to get the last train. There’s a gift for you in that drawer—don’t open it until you’re on the train. You’ll only make a fuss.” I pulled a brown paper package out of his bedside table, the approximate size and shape of a book.

I kissed his forehead. I kissed his bandaged hand. I whispered *I’msorryI’msorryI’msorry* in a broken little chant, as if I had been assigned to say it a certain number of times before I could receive absolution, except I knew the number was infinite.

“Oona?” He touched my hand, and said something in our language. It was the kind of phrase you might say to a loved one before a very long journey. It meant something like *I love you, and if I never see you again while I live then I’ll wait for you beneath the bone trees*.

I left without answering him. Why didn’t I shake him and ask what the hell he meant by that? Why didn’t I throw him over my shoulder and make a run for it? Most especially, why didn’t I tell him that I loved him, too, and would find him at the bone trees someday?

Instead I just looked at his clear-November eyes, at the sharpening bones in his face and the angry flush along his cheeks, and left with his gift tucked under my arm.

I opened the package on the train, just as he’d told me. It was a rather fine edition of *The Book of the Marvels of the West*, promising twenty-four color plates illustrating the Wondrous and True sights Polo saw.[16] He knew me well, my brother.

There was a note penned in shaky English:

Oona,

I want you to understand that this is a gift for you, but it's also a gift for me. It's a chance to choose, and make the choice mean something.

You have to run, my dear sister. Run wherever you like, but run very far and fast. Won't take the Company very long to find some new way to bend you, and this time I think you will snap in two.

Do not come back to St. Joseph's tomorrow, or do anything else foolish. I am something of an expert on how many days and hours a person in my state has left to live—haven't I seen enough of it at Saint Joe's?—and you will not be quick enough. And anyway it would spoil the gift.

All my love,

Ira

There was a postscript, cramped and shivery at the edge of the page:

P.S. Take this to the bone trees. I don't know if it will do any good, but I suppose I want to believe it will.

A hank of dark hair lay curled beneath the note.

I remember the curious sensation of simultaneous understanding and desperate not-understanding as I read. The letters arranged and rearranged themselves in obscure patterns, as if the ink lines were actually tiny, black-clawed beasts roaming through white fields.

I opened the book.

The inside had been messily hollowed out. In the wounded heart

of the book, piled carelessly like golden coins in some ancient treasury, were hundreds of fat, yellow tablets. Doses enough for a year, slipped beneath his tongue, spat into his palm, hidden away.

My brother had given me the gift of his death.

I cannot write it down, the name of the feeling that shuddered through me, or perhaps it has no name. It was as if every wound I had ever suffered reopened all at once, and I was watching my own blood flow away in a dozen red rivers. Or as if I had fallen from the flatboat and found there were stones in my pockets, and all I could see was the stream of bubbles twirling to the surface like escaping birds.

But it was worse than that. Far worse. Because beneath the drowning there was something oiled and sweet. Something that sang. Something that knew this terrible gift was a gift in truth.

I have hated myself for many years for that knowledge, for the queer synchronization of my heart breaking and the shackles falling from my wrists.

I closed my eyes as I stepped off the train, letting the Western sun touch my face with sweet scarlet fingers. *Run very far and fast.*

But oh, not yet.

Clayton and his men were loading the boat when I arrived next morning. I was a sleepless, shambling shadow of my usual self, but I suppose heartbreak resembles a hangover closely enough that I went unnoticed. Clayton's gold teeth flashed at me, and I managed not to leap at him and drown him in the coal-slicked water. Nor did I collapse on the dock and cradle my tear-swollen face, nor did I permit myself to wear the jagged, unhinged smile that tugged at my lips.

Black boots appeared beside me. "You understand your situation

clearly, don't you love?"

"Yes, sir." The *sir* tasted like bile and ash in my mouth.

"Give Ira my regards when you see him next." If Clayton had said Ira's name again, I think I would have flung everything away and clawed him to pink ribbons. But Clayton was not a foolish man. He saw me the way a surgeon might see a body, all my fragile nerves exposed on the operating table, neatly labeled arteries pumping love and hate in equal measures through my limbs. But he didn't know, didn't yet see the carved out hole where my heart had been.

I was a prisoner with the key held beneath my tongue, waiting for my moment.

He left. A few of the men muttered threats and entreaties on the journey across (*Give us another scare like that and soon we'll be looking for a new mapmaker* and *Can't never trust a savage, can you*), but I ignored them. I watched the steam swirling up from the river water as if someone were writing messages made of fog, and thought of Ira. His hair lay like the feather of some rare and precious bird in my palm.

The bank was a reedy marsh today, full of misleading humps and watery holes. The men complained. A few of the reeds seemed to snake around bootlaces in a sinister fashion, and the mud made greedy burbling sounds to itself. *Not yet*, I thought.

The path that led northwest was wide and still. A thousand other shapes tugged at its edges, suggesting and caressing and shoving. But I held it easily that day, almost joyfully, like holding back a pack of hounds before the hunt. Columbines nodded their scarlet heads at me as I passed. The fresh dawn light, so cheery and certain on the river, dimmed overhead. A shudder passed through the men behind me. The bone trees surrounded us.

"Don't let her spook you, boys," advised Clayton. His voice boomed and was swallowed in the black leaves above him.

The patterns of unpacking and measuring and clearing rustled

around me. The volume rose as the men took heart from Clayton's booted footsteps, his too-loud voice. Men like Clayton were born to settle new lands, I think, to render them rigid through the sheer force of their wills.[17] But he had lost his power over me; the noose around my heart hung slack and empty.

I stooped beneath my mother's gnarled tree. Her bleached jaw smiled at me.

"She'll take care of you, little brother," I promised. I tucked the lock of hair into the deep loam around the tree's roots. I even said a prayer, some limping hybrid of my aunts' old chants and the exaltations of the Baptist minister in Stone Gap. It would have outraged both parties, but I wasn't praying to either of their gods. I was praying to the trees, that they might find Ira's bones abandoned across the river and let them hang here in the twilight with our mother.

I stood up. I closed my eyes. A tiny corner of me jabbered in fear, wished I'd just slunk away into the night and never taken Clayton and his men out here again. But the rest of me was too emptied-out to fear anything at all.

I let go of the land, felt invisible reins slide from my fingertips.

Every bone in the trees shuddered in unison. The path disappeared. Tables and tools were swept away by purple vines writhing snakelike across the ground. The gentle loam was replaced by poison-colored flowers and thorny shrubs crouching in the shadows. Instead of dense black branches above us it was open sky, glowing a dull orange as if some distant city were aflame. The earth writhed beneath our feet like the hide of a monstrous horse, resettling itself in a different shape none of us had ever seen.

Tobacco-scented breath crawled across the back of my neck. "I'd have thought you'd learned." Clayton's voice was affable, drawling. "Ira deserves better than you, Oona."

I turned to face him, tear tracks burning down my cheeks like

comet trails and my hair blowing wild in the sudden wind. Clayton took a half-step back.

“Yes,” I answered, feeling my lips contorting into something like a smile. I stepped closer to him. “But Ira is dead.”

In that moment, having yanked his noose and found it hanging slack between us, I knew Clayton was afraid. The ruggedness of his features seemed to soften and slough away. I had the impression that he had never been at someone else’s mercy, never felt the fearful fragility of his life beneath some crushing force.

There was no pity in me. I looked out at the shifting land and thought to it, *Run wild, my love*.

And the world came unsewn.

Imagine the earth you walk along is just a vast and detailed map rolled out on some surveyor’s table. Now imagine that map is torn away, whisked from beneath your feet, or perhaps all the ink simply runs together in a sudden liquid chaos of rivers and mountains and neatly labeled regions. And your eyes ache just to see it, because you believed all your life that the labels on the map were the truth, and now you see they were just thin ropes stretched over the land and easily shaken off.

I suppose this is why the men screamed so terribly. Clayton fell to his knees with his tanned hands clutching his face. I laughed.

When the world reformed, the trees were ten times as tall as any tree ought to have been, with trunks like stone towers. The grass in the meadow now waved in purple-edged stalks taller than grown men,, rippling in the new, chill wind from the north. The orange sky burned darker.

I found I was looking down at them from a great height. The ground I had been standing on had shot straight into the air and become a high, chalky cliff. The wind that tore so cruelly at the men below was a soft caress on my skin.

Clayton had staggered upright again, spinning and panting in the tangled grass. He saw me standing still and tall on the cliff above him. “You *bitch*—”

An ominous thundering sound, as if of hooves or impossibly large paws, drifted from the trees. Black shapes seemed to be moving among them. The men were scattering, panicking, every story they’d ever heard about the West made horribly real.

“Come down here, girl. Fix this—where else can you go? A traitor and a half-savage?” Clayton was wheedling now, almost begging, hoping his voice could reach like hands into the queer twilight and wrap itself around my throat.

Behind him a surveyor made wild, hacking sweeps at the undergrowth with his knife, heading in the direction he must have assumed was East. He was wrong. Another man attempted to climb one of the vast trees, but the trunk made a grinding, splintering sound and he was gone.

Some of the men would survive, I thought, if they set down their compasses and knives and snaked through the land like ships through a dangerous harbor.

But Clayton would never see the Eastern shore again. His body would rot unseen, untouched by the bone trees, swallowed up by the ravenous border.

“West,” I told him. Clayton bared his teeth like a cornered animal and drew his silver pistol with shaking hands. I left him.

I told Ira I wouldn’t write down a word of what I saw out West, so I could never guide anyone to the heart of this dark, strange land. I want my own fleeting footprints to disappear like dew behind me.

I have paper and pen, though, and I cannot help but write—a symptom of the Easterner in me, I suppose. I write about the vast mauve-shadowed canyons that appear only at dusk, about the

nameless animals that leave behind golden scales and silver feathers, about the stars that shift their pearled patterns every night. Those pages I burn in the evenings, translating them into the cryptic language of ash and char.

But some pages—these pages—I fold and tuck into my pack. So that one day they can be found and read. So that someone else might know what it is to be born between two vast continents crashing together, and to become a traitor three times over, never certain precisely what you are betraying or why.

And, in the end, to be granted a lonely grace. To be freed, and know the cost of it.[18]

[1] My childhood obsession with travelogues and adventure novels—piles of Eastern nonsense, my aunts felt, indicative of my half-blooded impurities—tells me this is the way to begin an autobiography. For example: Bernard del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of the Old West*, trans. Maurice Keating (London: John Murray and Sons, 1800); Joshua Slocum, *Sailing Alone Down the Mississippi* (Boston: J. J. Little, 1903).

[2] We don't know where he went once my mother was through with him. He left his black leather Bible behind him and walked farther into the West. Perhaps the land let him live.

[3] Sir Polo's work is much debated in the scholarly community. There are some rather vocal flocks of historians who believe he wrote the entire thing on hearsay and imagination. I personally feel that if he was not mad when he began his journey he was quite mad upon its completion, and only God and the Amerinds of the far West know the truth. Sir Marcus Polo, *The Book of the Marvels of the West; Being an Honest Account of the New World and*

Its Inhabitants, 6th ed. (London: Thomas Cook Ltd., 1754).

[4] John L. O'Sullivan, "Annexation," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 17, (July-August 1845):, 5–11.

[5] This is not universally true. Plenty of lone wanderers—explorers, trappers, eccentric poets, hermits—have gone into the West without undue suffering. There are even a few families that have settled over here. If they keep to themselves and walk lightly down the paths, and don't worry overmuch about precisely how far away things are or the shapes of trees, they make decent lives for themselves. But when the Easterners march in those rigid lines, armed with compasses and gunpowder and bow saws, they fail.

[6] Even with the helpful Miss Sakakawea, only Meriwether came limping back home, claiming they'd seen the Pacific Ocean but also making a lot of other less plausible claims and muttering about betrayal, savagery, and madness. Captain Lewis, *History of the Expedition Under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clark: Into the West and Thence to the Pacific Ocean* (Philadelphia: Bradford and Inskeep, 1838).

[7] There used to be more names for the trees—thousands, even. Recent scholarship suggests Amerinds used to speak thousands of separate languages and called themselves a thousand different names. Over the years the lines between us—the things that made us Shawnee and Quapaw and Osage and Chickasaw—have blurred. We are like rocks under the pressure and heat of the earth, losing our edges and merging to form some new thing.

[8] There are competing theories about this subject. The most popular is Cosgrove's assertion that the entire process of mapmaking is about civilizing the land, and teaching it to recognize its truest form. But I disagree; I've always felt mapmaking is about *believing* in the solidity of a place, and the paintings help Easterners drive out their doubts. Edmund Cosgrove, *Order and Progress: Essays on the Symbolic Representation and Civilization of Western Lands* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1909).

[9] If you think I shouldn't have done it, that I should have scrabbled along in the shifting mud of the West forever rather than sell my land to the Easterners, then I suppose you're right. And I suppose you've never been hungry, never been a half-blooded outcast with a sick brother to look after.

[10] It is strange to suppose that the end result of this frontier obsession will be to eradicate it. What will they do then, I wonder, when every square mile lies placid beneath their plows? Jackson Turner, "The Frontier in Eastern History" (paper presented to the Eastern Historical Association, Louisville, Kentucky, 1893.

[11] The Eastern States technically claimed sovereignty over half the continent, although they could only move freely east of the Mississippi. It was an aspirational legal fiction, which meant they could exercise sporadic, unwelcome authority on small settlements very close to the river.

[12] It's an old oath, the kind they only say in overwrought Western romances written by Easterners. It refers to the bones of the land, and to the bones of our families swinging in the trees.

[13] My investigations into non-Western travelogues tell me this is unlikely to be true. Every stretch of land is too different, too unique, too secretive to be all lumped together. Dr. Livingstone's famous essay informed the world that the headwaters of the Nile were actually a vast inland ocean occupied by sea-faring gods. Meanwhile, the occupation of Ireland is plagued by mists and islands that are only present at certain times of day, and strange earthen mounds which are to be avoided at all costs. Empires are terribly fractious, slow enterprises. David Livingstone, "Essay on the Shocking Properties of Victoria Sea, Being an Honest Record of my Time There," (paper presented to the Royal Geographical Society, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1854).

[14] Sticks and Bones is an old Amerind game our aunts taught us, involving the systematic tossing of sticks and delicate bird bones on the table, and the competitive reading of different patterns therein. I've tried to teach more than one Easterner, but there is something about the process of seeing multiple meanings

within the same pattern that eludes them. “This,” declared one of my first lovers, “is a bit like reading one of Mr. Hawthorne’s dreadful novels, where everything is a symbol for something else.”

[15] It is my suspicion that travel writings from those few brave souls who wander into unsettled territory are the first steps toward conquest. Their words create an image in our minds of a still, singular place. Although, I confess, Conrad’s dark and twisted descriptions of the Mississippi as “resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land” probably did more to discourage settlement than assist it. Joe Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1884); Charlie Darwin, *The Voyage of the Spaniel* (London: Thomas Cook and Sons Ltd., 1839).

[16] Sir Marcus Polo, *The Book of the Marvels of the West; Being an Honest Account of the New World and Its Inhabitants*, 6th ed. (London: Thomas Cook Ltd., 1754).

[17] While you will not find such suppositions in works of reference, I can tell you beyond a shadow of a doubt that some mapmaking crews are far more effective than others, and it comes down to the men who lead them. Clayton was one of the most efficient men south of St. Louis, possessed of a steel-edged certainty that settled acres faster than three average crews stuck together.

[18] Editor’s note: These collected papers were published originally in 1929 by a now-defunct press in Chicago. (Oona Sawgrass, *The Autobiography of a Traitor and a Half-Savage* (Chicago: Wayfaring Press, 1929).They were mailed to the acquiring editor in a brown paper package bearing the inscription: *For Ira. I will meet you someday in the bone trees.*

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